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Explaining Ethical IT Behavior, Judgment and Awareness Using a Domain Theory Context

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Abstract

Unethical information technology (IT) behavior can lead to severe consequences in the workplace. Inappropriate and unethical use of IT is a prominent concern for managers governing their employee’s workplace behavior, having significant impacts for organizations beyond a decrease in productivity. However, moral values and norms of employees may not be consistent with organizational policies and ethical codes. The study investigates the context dependence of ethical IT behaviors and how people organization ethical IT dilemmas affect people’s behaviors. A survey method is used to investigate this phenomenon, using ethical dilemma scenarios.

Keywords

Introduction

Unethical information technology (IT) behavior can lead to severe consequences in the workplace. Inappropriate and unethical use of IT is a prominent concern for managers governing their employee’s workplace behavior, having significant impacts for organizations beyond a decrease in productivity. Consequentially, concerns about unethical IT behavior have drawn the attention of IS researchers investigating the phenomenon. However, the moral stance harbored in workplace policies and ethics codes may not be recognized or shared between different organization cultures, groups, or even individuals.

Indeed, previous research has supported this premise, suggesting that ethical IT behavior is highly contextual, depending largely upon the immediate organization culture (Banerjee, et al 1998). In other words, one's ethical or unethical behavior is more dependent upon the environment surrounding the individual posed with an ethical dilemma instead of the individual's attitudes and beliefs toward the ethical dilemma itself. For example, recognition and identification of potentially harmful activities was significantly disrupted in individuals when computer technology is introduced (Sproull Kiesler 1991), suggesting a difference between an individual's assessments of an ethical dilemma when computer technologies are introduced that is not present when computer technologies are absent. Simple saying “it depends” provides little no contribution to managers who are faced with developing a code of ethics or company policies that govern IT which are reasonable, necessary, and effective.
The study will address two research questions: (1) Why is ethical behavior regarding information technology context dependent? (2) What determines whether an individual will behave ethical or unethical in a situation regarding information technology?

The work contributes to literature and theory in two ways. The first contribution is to explain the highly contextual nature of ethics in information technology using domain theory and moral awareness. Second, this study explores how individuals classify ethical dilemmas into moral domains, and how such classification impacts the ethical behavior intention of individuals. The work also contributes to practice, helping managers develop more robust code of ethics which is consistent with the norms and attitudes of employees using information technology.

Literature Review

The study uses three constructs or theories of moral behavior previously studied in isolation in IS research, namely moral awareness, domain theory of moral development, and the theory of planned behavior.

Moral Awareness

One explanation of the contextual nature of ethical IT behavior is that the respondents may not have been cognizant that an ethical dilemma was present whatsoever (Reynolds 2006). Moral awareness is the recognition that a person’s decision or behavior will have consequences affecting the interests and welfare of the self or others (Reynolds 2006). In addition, Rest (1986) viewed moral awareness as the recognition of an individual that some ethical standard or principle applies. Previous research in the area has assumed that respondents understood a given scenario was indeed an ethical quandary. By controlling for those individuals who do not perceive a given scenario as an ethical dilemma, a more accurate picture of individuals’ moral judgments, attitudes, and intentions may be found. Interestingly, the presence of a social norm governing the ethical or unethical behavior (i.e. code of ethics, policies, etc.) may not be sufficient to raise awareness of an ethical dilemma; however, a visible consequence of such a behavior is more salient (Jones 1991). Therefore, notification whether each scenario contains an ethical dilemma may not be sufficient to raise awareness of the moral implications of the scenario.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) suggests that an individual’s behaviors are based upon the individual’s intention to behave in that manner, attitude towards that behavior, and personal normative beliefs (Ajzen 1985, 1989, 1991). TPB was adapted by Banerjee et al. (1998) for the context of ethical behaviors involving computer technology. However, in regards to computer technology, the theory of planned behavior, through moral judgments, attitudes, and personal normative beliefs, did not significantly explain the intention of ethical IT behaviors. In fact, only the situational variable (organization scenario) was significant. The Domain Theory of Moral Development (discussed in the following section) fulfills the explanatory role, suggesting that how individuals classify ethical dilemmas determines their judgments and attitudes toward that behavior. The major constructs in TPB (Figure 1) governing the intention toward ethical or unethical behavior are as follows:
Moral judgments are the manner in which an individual reasons when faced with an ethical dilemma, based upon the present state of moral development of the individual (Kohlberg 1971). One’s attitude towards ethical behavior is the degree that an individual responds favorably or unfavorably towards an ethical behavior, which is based upon the individual’s beliefs (Ajzen 1985, 1989, 1991). Finally, personal normative beliefs are the perceived moral obligation of the individual to perform the ethical behavior (Schwartz Tessler 1972). The particular ethical dilemma an individual faces influences these three constructs, such that the manner a person reasons, whether the person responds favorably or unfavorably, Ego strength, locus of control, and organizational ethical climate were all considered moderating variables and not explicitly supported by the theory of planned behavior, and were not particularly significant in previous studies of ethical behaviors involving computer technology. For this research, ego strength, locus of control, and organizational ethical climate will remain as control variables.

Domain Theory of Moral Development

The Domain Theory of Moral Development originated as an explanation about the development of ethical attitudes in children and adolescence, suggesting that children classify ethical dilemmas into different moral domains dependent upon their behaviors and the corresponding consequences to those behaviors (Gattiker Kelley 1999, Schweder et al. 1987). The domain theory of morality organizes ethical dilemmas into three different “domains” of morality. Throughout our development as a child, student, and even professional, we are exposed to ethical dilemmas, decisions, behaviors, and consequences of those decisions and behaviors. The consequences of our decisions and behaviors either reward or sanction our behavior, influencing our future behaviors and ultimately how we construct our system of ethics. Gattiker and Kelley (1999) found strong evidence suggesting that individuals have different moral judgments toward ethical dilemmas involving computer technology when ethical dilemmas are classified as different domains of morality.

Personal Domain

The personal domain includes any interpersonal consequences resulting from an ethical or unethical behavior is primarily of the individual's concern. In other words, ethical dilemmas in the personal domain are a function of personal tastes and preferences and/or the psychological state of the individual. Behaviors classified in the personal domain do not bear consequences or sanctions in social contexts, hence the emphasis on an individual's personal tastes and preferences. In

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*Figure 1: Theory of Planned Behavior (Banerjee et al 1998).*
addition, whether harm is an intrinsic factor of the behavior is irrelevant, as the outcome of that behavior does not have any social consequences; however, generally speaking such behaviors in the personal domain are not intrinsically harmful to the individual or to others. An example of an ethical dilemma in the personal domain is as follows:

One of your friends is a technical whiz and has just developed a new data encryption device (i.e. similar to a phone scrambler, as the device helps to protect conversations from wiretapping) and related software. You friend quickly demonstrates how the device works by sending an encrypted message to you. You subsequent decoding efforts fail, illustrating that the encryption device does its job very well. You and your friend then proceed to install this device and software on both of your machines for use when communicating with each other (Gattiker Kelley 1999).

**Conventional Knowledge Domain**

The *conventional knowledge domain* includes behaviors that are not considered intrinsically harmful by the individual or society, but carry social consequences. These behaviors are considered ethical or unethical depending on the social context the behavior; therefore, due to their socially dependent nature these behaviors are not universally accepted among people. Such actions are what would often be considered “taboo” in a social context, effectively by one group and not another. Behaviors in the conventional knowledge domain reflect social norms and values are established over time through consensus between individuals participating in the social context. An example of an ethical dilemma in the domain of conventional knowledge is as follows:

One of your friends is a real computer nut and has just written a new computer virus program. Your friend then proceeds to load the virus program into a BB or an electronic new-latter/listerver (EDL) (Gattiker Kelley 1999).

Behaviors of employees within organizations would appear natural to be attributed to the conventional knowledge domain, reflecting the norms and values consistent with the organizational culture. Alternatively, the conventional knowledge domain may reflect norms and values spanning multiple organizations, but relegated to a single professional sub-group, such as accountants or IT professionals.

**Moral Domain**

The *moral domain* includes behaviors that are considered intrinsically harmful, either perceived directly by the individual or inferred from direct perceptions (Turiel 1983). The behavior is universally considered unethical since harm is an inherent consequence of the action (Haidt et al. 1993). Such behaviors are not simply a matter of personal taste, having social consequences outside the individual or group. Consequences of unethical behaviors perceived in the moral domain are universally considered harmful to other individuals; therefore, behaviors perceived within the moral domain are not dependent on social norms and values. An example of an ethical dilemma in the moral domain is as follows:

Your friend has just received a new computer game through an EGL located abroad. The game is banned in this country because of its violent, sexual, and racist content. Your friend tests the game. Although he or she finds it somewhat disgusting, your friends sends a copy to another friend abroad, where no regulation exists banning the game. Your friend does not keep a copy of the game (Gattiker Kelley 1999).
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Research Model

Figure 2: Moral awareness and moral judgment domain model.

The research model (Figure 2) is adapted primarily from Banerjee et al (1998) and Gattiker and Kelley (1999). The model suggests that the Domain Theory of Morality provides a sufficient explanation for the lack of support of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), a consistently well supported theory in other contexts, although ethical situations involving computer technology an exception. Domain Theory of Morality provides bounded contextual factors by organizing an individual’s attitudes and judgments of an ethical dilemma into various domains. It is suspected that these domains provide the necessary explanation to support attitude and moral judgments of an ethical behavior as a predictor of intention to behave ethically or unethically. In addition, the domain theory of morality provides an explanation for the contextual nature of ethics involving computer technology over and above current contextual factors.

Moral awareness (Reynolds 2006) affects the recognition of the individual of an ethical dilemma. Consistent with Gattiker and Kelley (1999), each ethical dilemma is attributed to one of the three domains of morality identified previously. By identifying the moral domain the individual attributes the ethical dilemma to, an individual’s moral judgment and attitude toward an ethical or unethical IT behavior. Consistent with Banerjee et al (1998) and previous research in TPB, moral judgments, attitudes, and personal normative beliefs will dictate an individual’s intention to behavior ethically or unethically. In addition, organization scenario, representing the ethical culture and ethical environment perceived by the individual, will affect an individual’s intention to behavior ethically or unethically.

Research Methodology

A survey approach will be used, wherein ethical dilemma scenarios will be accompanied by a set of questionnaires. Previous research conducted in ethics of information technology has predominately used survey methodology and scenarios depicting ethical dilemmas to illicit responses from respondents (Banerjee et al 1998, Gattiker & Kelley 1999, Parker 1980, Weiss 1991). Each ethical dilemma scenario is accompanied by several questions concerning the moral domain, attitude, and behavioral intention of the respondent. Following the scenario-based questions, the respondents will complete a battery of scenario-independent questions that correspond to the remaining constructs, including personal normative beliefs, ego strength, locus of control, etc.

Sample

Three target populations are considered for the methodology. First, professionals current working in IT-related positions will be the primary sample for this study. Second, graduate student in IT-related fields will represent a second sample. In addition, graduate students IT-related fields will be considered by separate and synonymous with IT professionals. The third and final sample consists of undergraduate students in a variety of fields, representing the general populous of upcoming computer users in the workplace.
The rationale for using three different samples is as follows. IT professionals are an ideal population, as such individuals handle the bulk of IT-related work within an organization. In addition, IT professionals are much more likely to create and advise management on creating IT policy within the organization. Finally, IT professionals are bound to codes of ethics (either implicit or explicit) unique to other employees.

Nevertheless, while IT professionals are more likely to help develop a code of ethics, or create organization policy governing information technology; rarely do IT professionals embody the majority of employees in the workplace who are users of information technology. Therefore, a population with reflects a more general class of professionals and employee is necessary, hence sampling from a general

Scenarios

Previous research is plentiful with scenarios involving various IT issues, including security and privacy; however, these scenarios may not be able to illicit the proper responses from the subjects, particularly the attribution of the ethical dilemma to one domain of morality. Therefore, validated scenarios for the purpose of this study are few and far between. Scenarios must be designed such that the subject attributes each scenario to a single moral domain. Gattiker and Kelley (1999) developed three scenarios for this purpose, one for each of the domains of morality (these scenarios were used as domain examples previously in this paper). Additional scenarios from previous literature will be attributed to one of the moral domains. If additional scenarios are necessary and those presently in literature cannot be modified, additional scenarios will be created by author to explicitly illicit subject's attribution of moral domains to the ethical dilemmas based upon similar scenarios. Preliminary testing will be conducted to determine how each of the scenarios should be attributed and/or modified to better correspond to each domain of morality.

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